

The Perspicuity of the Scriptures: Presupposition, Principle or Phantasm

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Summary

The doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures was clearly articulated and strongly defended by the Reformers. Evangelical Christians today also need to reaffirm and defend this biblical doctrine. This article addresses the importance of this doctrine and looks at different definitions of this doctrine as well as its limitations. In the second part, theological and biblical evidence supporting the perspicuity of the Scriptures is presented. In the final section, the author suggests an answer to the question of whether the perspicuity of the Scriptures is a presupposition brought to the biblical text or a principle of interpretation.

Introduction

From John Wycliffe and his Lollard followers, to William Tyndale and his ploughboy, to Martin Luther and the German people, the Reformers and their predecessors were well-known for their zeal to put the Bible in the hands of the people in their own language. They were convinced that the reading of the Bible by the common people would do far more good than damage to the true church. They were also certain that all people, whether ploughboy or king, could understand the message of God's Word. Motivated by their belief that the Scriptures are clear or perspicuous, they labored, suffered persecution, and some even gave their lives to accomplish the noble task of translating the Scriptures into the various languages of the countries of Europe.

This doctrine, the perspicuity of the Scriptures, which was so important to the Reformers, should likewise be important to us today. Most readers are probably familiar with the context of the debate between Luther and Erasmus

that brought a spotlight to this foundational presupposition for the Reformers. In that time, the Bible was largely not available in the common language and the Roman Catholic Church considered it the exclusive right of the Church to determine the meaning of the Scriptures.

Today, the situation is quite different. The post-modern conclusion that truth is relative has led to a complete distrust of all institutions as well as all authorities. According to the spirit of the age, everyone has the right to private interpretation regardless of the rules and conventions of language and traditional meaning.¹ Current literary criticism has demoted the author (if not dismissed him altogether), promoted the “interpretive community”, and determined that the interpretive process is a never ending dynamic exchange between the interpreter and the text. As a result, it is no longer possible or tolerated to speak of the “plain meaning” of the Bible (Thompson, 2006:36-43). Note James Callahan’s words,

“There is a sincere distrust of perspicuity, and a praise of obscurity, afoot in modern hermeneutics. Either perspicuity is regarded as the epitome of pre-critical naïveté and sacrificed on the altar of modernity, or it is regarded as a Gnostic theme and a code available only to the privileged... Perspicuity is quickly and easily dismissed as nothing more than an illusion, a fideistic commitment to a religious fallacy that ancient texts are coherently understood with a realism uncommon even in our own day” (1996:362).

What was once plain to all is no longer plain to many. What is plain to one person in this post-modern age is certainly not plain to another. Instead, each person interprets in their own context, and that interpretation is considered legitimate. Unfortunately, in the end, no text has any firm meaning (especially not a biblical text, it seems). If a text can mean anything, then it is possible that it means everything. But if a text means everything, it ultimately means nothing.

Is this really the case? Can we know what the Bible and the texts that make it up mean? Can we overcome the objections of the literary critics and deconstructionists of the current age and conclude with certainty who God is and what he expects from us? In a day when influential leaders of movements within the “evangelical” church openly question the value of doctrine or certainty, and deconstructionists and higher critics claim that meaning is illusive and objectivity impossible, what hope is there for the child of God who simply wants to study the Bible for personal edification? What is the pastor with limited time and resources

1 To be consistent, the post-modernist would likely insist that language is inherently ambiguous, that there are no rules or standard conventions of language and that meaning is illusive in the first place. This is especially true of “religious” language. What might be called post-modern hermeneutics, or interpretation, is not really interpretation at all since interpretation, by definition, involves the establishment, elucidation or ascription of meaning.

supposed to do in order to prepare a quality meal for his flock on Sunday? Are the Scriptures clear? Can they be understood? Is it possible to determine the true meaning of a passage?

Absolutely, it is. Words still have meaning and words in a specific context have a specific meaning. That meaning, most especially in the case of the Bible, must be sufficiently clear and accessible to all who honestly read it. There is no other alternative. If the Scriptures are not clear, then every doctrine of the Scriptures is undefined. An inspired, authoritative, true word that is obscure offers no benefit to its reader. There can be no confidence in trials, no comfort in sorrow and no salvation in the gospel if it is impossible to come to a reasonable certainty as to what the Bible has to say. This doctrine is as important as ever and it needs to be restated and affirmed robustly and unequivocally. The Word of God is clear.

The Definition and Limitations of the Perspicuity of the Scriptures

What is the Perspicuity of the Scriptures?

Throughout church history all the way up to the present, opponents of the clarity of the Scriptures have leveled various objections at this doctrine. In order to refute or deflect those accusations, a clear definition of what is meant by this doctrine must be stated. The following is a sampling of definitions by evangelical theologians.

Even though he was not the first to elucidate this basic assumption regarding the Bible, Martin Luther occupies an important role in its definition. In *The Bondage of the Will*, he provides one of the most basic and thorough explanations from the Protestant tradition. He defends the doctrine and its implications arguing for both an external clarity that extends to the whole world and an internal clarity that is available to those in whom the Spirit of God dwells (Luther, 1999:73).²

The Westminster divines included an article about the Bible's clarity in their Confession of Faith written in 1646.³ Chapter one, article seven states,

“...Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”

Notice that the writers of this document chose to limit the scope of the Bible's

2 For an 11-point summary of Luther's teaching on the clarity of the Scriptures see, Larry Pettegrew, “The Perspicuity of Scripture” *The Masters Seminary Journal*, 15 (Fall 2004):221-223.

3 The 1689 *Baptist Confession of Faith* also contains this article.

clarity to that which is “necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation.”

Echoing the sentiments of the Reformers, Charles Hodge penned this statement in the nineteenth century,

“The Bible is a plain book. It is intelligible by the people. And they have the right, and are bound to read and interpret it for themselves; so that their faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not on that of the Church. Such is the doctrine of Protestants on this subject” (Hodge, 1997:183).

Wayne Grudem devotes a whole chapter to this doctrine in his *Systematic Theology*. He writes,

“The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeing God’s help and being willing to follow it” (Grudem, 1994:108).

In the last decade, at least two books by evangelicals have been dedicated to this subject. James Callahan describes this doctrine in the following terms,

“Scripture can be and is read with profit, with appreciation and with transformative results. It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive readers. Scripture itself is coherent and obvious. It is direct and unambiguous as written; what is written is sufficient. Scripture’s concern or focal point is readily presented as the redemptive story of God. ... All this is to say: Scripture is clear about what it is about” (Callahan, 2001:9).

Finally, Mark Thompson, at the end of his thorough investigation of this theme, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scriptures* offers this definition, “The Clarity of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God’s communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith” (Thompson, 2006:169-170). This definition emphasizes that the clarity of the Scriptures is ensured because it comes from God.

This brief survey of definitions shows that there are several common elements among them. Most definitions emphasize the necessity of faith, honesty or objectivity in approaching the Scriptures. Of course, this faith and honesty is a work of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the reader as emphasized by Luther’s “internal clarity.” The Westminster theologians, in their brief statement, extend clarity only to matters concerning salvation, so it seems. If this was their intention, then they have unnecessarily limited their definition in comparison to others. This author agrees with those definitions which state that the perspicuous nature of God’s revelation applies to its general content and not to just those matters which pertain to salvation. The whole of the Bible is light and the believer can read all of it in order to gain instruction, insight and blessing.

What are the Limits to the Perspicuity of the Scriptures?

While a systematic response to the historical objections to this doctrine is beyond the scope of this short article⁴, it must be acknowledged that there are limits to the doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures. To deny this would be to disagree with the Apostle Peter regarding *some* of the writings of Paul. Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:15-16,

“and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (NASB).

If Peter struggled with some of Paul’s writings, certainly today’s interpreters will also have some difficulties from time to time. However, instead of throwing out this doctrine on the basis of Peter’s confession, we can establish proper limits for it.

First of all, as the Westminster confession of faith affirms, all passages of the Bible are not as clear and easy to understand as others. Their statement on clarity in chapter one, article seven, is prefaced with the concession that “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.” Some passages are certainly clearer than others. Some passages require more effort to understand. However, this does not annul the doctrine of clarity. Those who support the clarity of the Scriptures have never claimed that every verse or proposition in the Bible is straightforward and easy to understand.

In fact, this leads to another limitation on the clarity of the Scriptures. Sometimes interpretation requires hard work. It is not always simple. However, the necessity of hard work does not negate the Bible’s clarity. Two reasons follow for this difficulty. The first is due to the remaining sin nature of the child of God. The fact that every reader needs to grow, change, develop, put off old sinful habits and put on new, God-honoring habits, complicates the process of interpretation. In fact, sometimes the Bible says exactly what we do not want it to say. In those cases, by God’s grace, the interpreter must put aside his/her own prejudices, pre-conceptions and self-justifications, and then proceed to interpret the passage correctly by God’s grace.

4 For answers to some of the historical arguments against the general clarity of the Scriptures, see Luther, *Bondage of the Will*; William Whitaker’s *Disputatio de sacra scripture contra hujus temporis papistas*, trans. and ed. W. Fitzgerald as *Disputations on Holy Scripture against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, Cambridge: Parker Society, 1849 (359-401) and F. Turretin (1679-85), *Institution theologiae elencticae*, trans. G. M. Giger, ed. J. T. Dennison, as *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., Phillipsburg: P. & R., 1992 (144-145).

Secondly, the task of interpretation is simply not always easy. The Bible testifies to this fact. Luke commended the Bereans for their diligence and hard work. They were “examining the Scriptures daily” (Acts 17:11) to verify that which they were taught. The word “examine” (Gr. ἀνακρίνω) connotes careful examination and thorough study (Louw & Nida, 1996; Friberg, 2000). It is often used in a judicial setting where a careful investigation must be made in order to render a verdict. The noble work of the Bereans required effort and perseverance. However, they succeeded because of the inherent clarity of the Scriptures. They could, themselves, verify Paul’s teaching. Peter likewise states that the prophets, authors themselves, “made careful searches and inquiries” (1 Peter 1:10) of their own writings, but this effort paid off, and verse twelve states that the marvelous purpose of their prophecies “was revealed to them.” So many years removed from the original events and audience, today’s interpreter has many language, cultural and historical barriers to overcome in order to properly interpret the Word of God. However, with hard work, perseverance, and faith, the modern reader can succeed.

Solomon also encourages effort in the study of the Scriptures in order to gain the wisdom necessary for life. Proverbs 2:3-5 contains the wonderful promises, “If you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; If you seek [Lady Wisdom] as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God” (NASB). These promises are made to those who receive and treasure the words and commandments of God (v. 1). However, Solomon uses imagery that suggests effort and hard work. The synonymous parallelism between the words “seek” and “search” emphasizes the intensity of the effort, while the metaphors of “silver” and “treasure” suggest a picture of digging and mining. The blessings of wisdom do not lay on the surface waiting to be scooped up by the passer-by. Likewise, the blessings of God’s revelation give themselves to those who intensely and thoroughly seek them. With effort, they are accessible. The Scriptures are clear.

In situations when a specific passage is not clear, then a corollary to the clarity of Scriptures, that is, the principle that “Scripture interprets Scripture,” serves the student of the Bible. Luther gets much recognition for expressing this rule of interpretation with the following statement, “If words are obscure in one place, they are clear in another” (Luther, 1999:71). However, Augustine stated this principle much earlier saying, “For almost nothing is dug out of those obscure passages which may not be found set forth in the plainest language elsewhere” (Augustine, 1958:31). This standard of biblical interpretation has served the church and diligent students of the Bible throughout history and ensures that all that is necessary for the benefit of the child of God is clearly accessible somewhere in the revelation of God.

Finally, the doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures does not invalidate the need for gifted preachers and teachers in the church. The Bible records incidents when interpreters were needed. The Ethiopian eunuch, upon reading Isaiah 53, asked Philip, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” (Acts 8:34, NASB). Philip seized the opportunity to launch from this passage and “preach Jesus” to him. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus needed Christ’s exposition of himself from Moses and the prophets in order to have their eyes opened to the purpose and necessity of Jesus’ death (Luke 24:14-35). God has likewise given gifted men to the church to serve in the role of pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints (Ephesians 4:11-13). The Holy Spirit has distributed teaching gifts to individual believers for the common good (1 Corinthians 12-14; Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11).⁵

Evidence Supporting the Perspicuity of the Scriptures

There are many reasons which support the belief that the Scriptures are clear in their message and teaching. Following are two theological reasons and then a look at the Bible’s own testimony regarding its clarity.

I. Theological Considerations for the Perspicuity of the Scriptures

The Nature of God and its Relation to the Perspicuity of the Scriptures

God is the inventor of language. He gave Adam the ability to speak and caused the multiplication of languages that took place in Genesis 11. In fact, it could be said that God is the inventor of all communication. He took the initiative to speak to Adam and Eve. His first communication with them was a blessing and

- 5 For a positive statement on what the perspicuity of the Scriptures does mean, see Pettegrew, 2004:214-216. In the interest of brevity, I will simply list them here. The Perspicuity of Scripture means: 1) the Scriptures are clear enough for the simplest person to live by, 2) the Scriptures are deep enough for readers of the highest intellectual ability, 3) the Scriptures are clear in all of their essential matters, 4) the obscurity that a reader of the Bible may find in some parts of the Scriptures is the fault of finite and sinful humankind, 5) interpreters of the Scriptures must use ordinary means [to interpret], 6) even an unsaved person can understand the plain teachings of the Scriptures on an external level, 7) the Holy Spirit must illumine the mind of the reader or hearer of the Scriptures if he/she is to understand the significance of the Scriptures, and 8) in accordance with the priesthood of the believer, every Christian the right, and is indeed bound, to read and interpret it for him/herself, so that his/her “faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not on that of the Church” (Charles Hodge).

an assignment for them to complete. Later, when mankind was disobedient and refused to “Be fruitful, multiply and *fill* the earth” (Genesis 1:28, a command that was essentially repeated three more times in Genesis 8 & 9), God confused mankind by giving them different languages. The One who created languages certainly can use them effectively to communicate His message to the world.

The Bible could even be viewed as a record of God’s communication to man. In fact, it is his self-revelation. Every time God speaks to someone directly or through a mediator and that person responds with joy, sorrow, delight or fear, God proves that he is an effective communicator. If the meaning of God’s word is totally inaccessible, then God would have to be at fault as the original or ultimate author. We must start with the assumption that the Scriptures are clear and confess that when they are not, then the interpreter and his/her limitations are the cause, not the author.

God’s final and complete revelation has come in his son, Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1-4). However, God has provided for a written account of his life and activity in the Bible. He has also given the rest of the New Testament to record the early work of the apostles who helped build the church and establish her doctrine. While God personally revealed himself in his son, he still provided a written description and explanation of who Jesus is and what the responsibilities of his followers are. That written description is the standard of behavior and conduct for the believer. Since God gave the Scriptures both to reveal himself and his son, they must be clear.

This is not to say that God can be adequately described with words. Words fail to completely and thoroughly describe the One who “alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16, NASB). Words are inadequate to detail the excellencies of the Lamb who is worthy to receive all “power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Revelation 5:12, NASB). However, God gave us words. He spoke to us in words. Words may be insufficient to express everything there is to express about God, but they must be sufficient enough to communicate all that we must know and believe about God as well as all that God wants us to do. God chose this medium. Since He is the inventor of language and the first to ever use words to communicate, we can be sure that the Scriptures are clear.

Not only is the clarity of the Scriptures consistent with God’s role as the first communicator and inventor of language, it is also consistent with his divine nature, specifically his kindness and justice. In the Bible, God has revealed himself. However, he has also revealed a way for humans who are dead in their sins and transgressions to be made alive and be reconciled to their Creator. This is an act of mercy and grace. After the fall of Adam and Eve, God could have easily and justly punished them and never provided a means for salvation. He

could have taken their lives and started again from the beginning if he so chose. However, even in the verdict of judgment, God provided hope (Genesis 3:15), and by allowing Adam and Eve to live and reproduce, God pursued his plan of redemption all the way through to the end when he sent his son to earth to die as the representative for believing sinners. In order to be reconciled to God, in order to be justified, it was always necessary to believe Him, to believe His promises, to believe His gospel (Genesis 15:6; Numbers 14:11; Psalm 84:12; Jeremiah 17:7; Luke 18:12; John 3:16). The message of salvation is clear, understandable. It must be because God is kind and he redeems all who truly believe him and put their trust in his promises and provision.

Along with the message of salvation, God has always expected his nation, or his followers, to fulfill certain responsibilities which he has outlined. From the beginning of time, he has delineated conditions for his blessings. As mentioned above, his first conversations with Adam and Eve include instructions and prohibitions. He expected them to abide by these instructions and punished them accordingly when they did not. While Satan, with his sinister question, “Did God really say?” undermined God’s instructions, neither Adam nor Eve appealed to the fact that God’s command was unclear when they were judged.

Later, God told the nation of Israel,

“Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the Lord’s commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13, NASB).

God has, in his history of dealing with his people, always rewarded obedience and punished disobedience. Jesus also echoes this formula (Matthew 7:24-27). If God is just, then his words must be clear. Otherwise, he would make blessing contingent and punishment the result of obscure promises and prohibitions. Martin Luther pointed out, “In a word, if the Scripture is obscure or equivocal, why need it have been brought down to us by act of God? Surely we have enough obscurity and uncertainty within ourselves, without our obscurity and uncertainty and darkness being augmented from heaven!” (Luther, 1999:128).

Only a cruel and unjust God would give a confusing, unclear and ambiguous message and then make blessing contingent on understanding that message, or hold humankind responsible for obedience to that message under the threat of punishment. Clearly, God is merciful and generous. He redeems sinners. He blesses obedience and punishes disobedience. He has provided his people with expectations, responsibilities and prohibitions that are clear enough for them to understand.

The Nature of the Scriptures and its Relation to the Perspicuity of the Scriptures

As mentioned earlier, God has committed himself to redeeming sinners who come to him in faith. One of the great themes of the Scriptures is God's redemptive work and how people can be saved. The first promise of the gospel, the protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15, has already been mentioned. But the Scriptures' nature as the revelation of God's person and his intention to redeem humankind requires it to be clear. God wants his people to know him. From God's perspective, the only reason for a human to boast is to boast in the personal knowledge of a God who "exercises loving kindness, justice and righteousness on earth" (Jeremiah 9:24). The result of the new covenant is complete fellowship with his people and a comprehensive knowledge of his person (Jeremiah 31:33-34). A key part of Jesus' mission in the world was to reveal (Matthew 11:27) and explain the Father (John 1:18). Furthermore, Jesus equates eternal life with knowing God. Therefore this pursuit of knowledge and intimacy with God will be the primary occupation of the believer throughout eternity. God has revealed himself so that he can be known. The opening verses of Hebrews trace the historic progression in this noble and generous venture by the Almighty. According to the author of Hebrews, God began revealing himself to the fathers long ago through prophets over many years and in many different ways. However, his ultimate self-revelation was through his own son. If God desires that his people know him, how will he realize this goal through an ambiguous self-revelation?⁶ The purpose and nature of the Scriptures requires that they be clear. Not only is this a necessary assumption theologically, but it is also the clear testimony of the Scriptures themselves.

One example of an explicit purpose statement in one of the books of the Bible demonstrates this point. The Apostle John, for instance, clearly states his reason for writing his gospel:

"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31, NASB).

John was motivated by the desire to convince people that Jesus is the Messiah, the very Son of God, and thereby receive eternal life. John wrote his own account of Jesus' life and ministry. In order to prove this assertion, he had to write a

6 While the focus of this article is the clarity of the Scriptures, it must also be noted that general revelation is sufficiently clear enough that the sinner who is unthankful and does not give God proper honor can be held responsible and condemned for his unrighteous suppression of the truth (Romans 1:18-20). The revelatory light that all humankind has is sufficient to condemn every individual who chooses to ignore that light (cf. Romans 2:14-15 and 3:19-20).

coherent, understandable report. His purpose demanded that his gospel be clear. The redemptive purpose of the Scriptures in general also requires that the Bible as a whole be clear.

II. Biblical Support for the Perspicuity of the Scriptures

There is ample biblical support for the perspicuity of the Scriptures. First, we will consider explicit support and then implicit evidence related to the audience of the Scriptures.

Self-Testimony of the Scriptures

The imagery of light is repeatedly applied to the Scriptures. Since light serves to help us see things more clearly, it makes sense to begin with this theme. Psalm 119:105 and 119:130 both testify to the light-giving quality of the law of God. The Psalmist writes, “Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path” and “The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple” (NASB). This same truth is expressed in the New Testament by the Apostle Peter, “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to *pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts*” (2 Peter 1:19, NASB).⁷ This common metaphor is perhaps the strongest evidence that the Bible offers concerning its own clarity. A lamp without light does not push back the darkness. If the Word of God does not give light then God’s people and the world remain in darkness.

There are additional explicit statements. For example, in Deuteronomy, when Moses wanted to encourage the children of Israel toward obedience, he assured the nation that the law which God had given them was neither difficult, nor inaccessible. Instead, it was near to them and they could understand and obey it. They did not need to undertake great feats to determine God’s expectations. They simply needed to obey the revelation which was “near to them” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Despite the fact that the nation was overwhelmingly hard-hearted towards God and prone toward idolatry, their failure to obey and procure blessing for themselves was not due to the complexity or ambiguity of the revelation that God had given them. The Corinthian church offers a New Testament example. They struggled with obedience themselves, but this did not prevent Paul from writing to them. 2 Corinthians 1:13 reads, “For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end” (NASB).

7 See also Psalm 43:3; Proverbs 6:23; 2 Corinthians 2:4-6.

Perhaps the most familiar statement in the Bible about the Scriptures is related to its inspiration. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (NASB). This clear statement about the source, authority and inerrancy of God's revelation also establishes the clarity of the Scriptures. Alongside the Bible's inspiration is its profitability. This profitability relates to its use in informing the mind, confronting the heart, molding the will and nurturing the soul in righteous, God-honoring behavior. The cumulative effect is that the person of God is fully equipped by the word to do the ministry that God has called him/her to do. This is not accomplished through innuendo, ambiguity or mysticism. By the renewing of the mind with the clear truth of the Scriptures, God prepares his servant to work in the local church.

The enlightening effect of the Scriptures benefits all who honestly read it. This applied to the scholarly Paul, who was trained in a rigorous rabbinic tradition, as well as to the uneducated and untrained fishermen apostles who boldly testified before the rulers and priests of Jerusalem. David, in Psalm 19, points out that the Scriptures are able to enlighten even the simplest of people. In Psalm 19:7-8, he states, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (NASB). While all of the effects and blessings attached to the reading and meditation on the law that are listed from verses seven to eleven assume the clarity of the Scriptures, we will just focus on two.

First, as has already been mentioned, we find another allusion to the revelation of God as light (v. 8). The commandments that are found in the Old Testament law enlighten the reader. However, even stronger support for the clarity of the Scriptures is found in verse seven. The sure testimonies of the Lord, according to David, make the – "simple" wise. Two words in this verse deserve attention. First notice the word "sure". This strongly contradicts the post-modern assumption that truth is relative or that moral and doctrinal absolutes do not exist. The law of God is certain, reliable, fixed; it will not misinform or mislead.

Secondly, we should focus on the word "simple". This word refers to someone who is naïve, simple and easily deceived (Holladay, 1991; Brown, Driver and Briggs, 2000). In Proverbs, this same person is so uninformed that they are a danger to themselves (1:32; 27:12). The simple person believes everything he/she hears because he/she lacks discernment (14:15). However, the promise of the Scriptures is that this very person can become wise if he/she fills his/her mind with the Word of God. In Psalm 119:130, the psalmist repeats this affirmation combining again the metaphor of light with this effect on the simplest of readers.

“The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple” (NASB). Commenting on these two propositions, Wayne Grudem comments, “This should be a great encouragement to all believers: no believer should think himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it” (Grudem, 1994:106). Again we see that through direct statements, as well as metaphors and implication, the Bible attests to its own clarity.

The Audience of the Scriptures

Biblical evidence for the clarity of the Scriptures is also found in the makeup of its original audience. From the whole nation of Israel, who received the words of Moses both as a history of God’s dealings with them and as a national constitution between God and his nation, to the individual countries, cities and towns who heard the words of the prophets, the prophets and writers of the Old Testament broadcast their message to a wide audience. From time to time, the authors addressed kings, priests and others who were educated. However, in much of the Old Testament, a prophet or historian wrote with the general public in mind. Even the official records of the kings of Israel and Judah, as well as official correspondence that is found in parts of the Old Testament, were written in a clear and straightforward way.

This is true for the New Testament as well. The Gospels, Acts and the epistles were written with specific groups, individuals or churches in mind. The churches had memberships which included both educated people and slaves. If these epistles were meant to be read to the whole church, then it follows that the whole church would be able to understand them. Even the book of Revelation opens with this marvelous promise. “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Revelation 1:3). While this statement may give pause to the modern reader familiar with the various schools of interpretation of this sometimes challenging book, the overall message of the prophecy is clear. God expects a specific response from every reader, and promises to bless the one who heeds its content.

Of special interest in the New Testament is the direct address to children in both Colossians and Ephesians. This should not come as any surprise because one of the primary responsibilities of the nation of Israel was to teach the words of the Law “diligently to your sons and talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). When Paul directly addresses children in Ephesians 6:1 and in Colossians 3:20, he includes promises and warnings. He placed expectations on them to obey the commands so that they might procure for themselves life and blessing.

2 Timothy 3:15 reinforces this point. Paul reminds Timothy of the life

generating power of the Word of God when he writes, “from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (NASB). Even as a child learning from his mother and grandmother, Timothy had the wisdom of God found in the sacred writings of the nation of Israel within reach. This wisdom was sufficiently clear, even to a child’s mind, to be believed and thereby grant salvation.

A broad range of people received the books of the Scriptures from the original authors. This range included uneducated slaves as well as children. According to 1 Corinthians 10:11 and Romans 15:4, what was written in the Old Testament was written for the benefit of the New Testament church, including the church of today, with members from diverse backgrounds, cultures and experiences. In itself, the Scriptures must be clear to have an impact on such a broad range of people.

Is Perspicuity a Presupposition about the Scriptures, a Principle of Interpretation or Simply a Useless and Distracting Phantasm?

Finally, we come to the question posed in the title of this article. In light of the theological necessity that has been demonstrated, as well as the biblical evidence provided for the clarity of the Scriptures, we have eliminated the option that this doctrine is a mirage or fallacy that only distracts from discussions about the Bible. However, it is now appropriate to ask the question: is this simply a presupposition which we bring to the Scriptures or can this doctrine, in fact, be used as a principle of interpretation? At the risk of sounding naïve and out of step with current literary criticism, this author still believes that principles and rules of interpretation serve a vital role in determining the meaning of a biblical text. Unfortunately, very few of the more recently published hermeneutic textbooks or handbooks of exegesis provide a general system of guidelines for determining the meaning of the text. One example would be Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart’s book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. They follow the modern trend of focusing almost exclusively on genre while providing very little concrete aid in general interpretation. In fact, they explicitly state that they do not intend to focus on rules (Fee and Stuart, 1993:11).⁸ While recent developments in

8 Fee and Stuart state on page 11, “Here we have avoided giving rules. What we have offered are guidelines, suggestions, helps.” One is hard pressed to find very many “rules” or even clear “guidelines” for generally interpreting a text in Fee and Stuart’s book. The nearly exclusive emphasis is on different genres and suggestions on how to approach each one individually. Another example would be Robert Stein’s (1994) book, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Michigan). Stein devotes a whole sec-

understanding different genres has been very helpful in the area of hermeneutics, the opinion of this author is that an overemphasis on this area of study has led to an eschewing of general rules of interpretation for any text.⁹ Each genre has its unique characteristics, but a wholesale change in approach to interpretation is not necessary when approaching a text of a different genre, rather a fine tuning of the general rules of hermeneutics.¹⁰

Should the clarity of the Scriptures then simply be a philosophical commitment of the evangelical Christian, or can it be useful even as a general principle for interpretation? A survey of various hermeneutic texts shows differing answers to this question. Most hermeneutic textbooks which discuss perspicuity tend to suggest that it is a presupposition in the task of interpretation. For example, Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, in *Let the Reader Understand*, discuss the clarity of the Scriptures as a presupposition asking and positively answering the question, "Is the Bible Coherent?" (McCartney and Clayton, 2002:38-52).

On the other hand, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*, edited by Mal Couch, provides eleven general principles for interpretation. While not explicitly speaking of the clarity of the Scriptures, principle number nine focuses on the literal meaning of the text. The principle is stated, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, and literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise" (Couch, 2000:67).

Bernard Ramm, in *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, discusses the clarity of

tion to the general rules of interpretation before moving on to specific rules governing the various genres. However, in the three main chapters of that section, he discusses the various theories of interpretation, the meanings of various terms in interpretation and the qualifications of the interpreter. There are no general rules, as such, for interpretation provided in this section. These discussions are all very helpful, as are the discussions on genre, however to write a text or guide for interpretation and fail to provide general principles of interpretation for the reader or student is, in my opinion, an unfortunate omission.

- 9 This may appear as an overstatement, however, a perusal of recent books on hermeneutics, whether intended as textbooks for Bible colleges or seminaries, or simply as guides for the lay person bears this out. Compare with these older standards like Terry, Ramm, or more recently, Zuck, and the difference is notable.
- 10 In order to be clear, let me state that genre is important, even essential; however, it is not the sole or exclusive concern in interpretation. An interpreter who carefully and thoroughly observes the text and who is equipped with a familiarity with the different genres should be able to come to firm conclusions about the meaning of passages by applying the traditional canons of interpretation to his or her observations of the passage. For more on the topic of overemphasis on the subject of genre, see chapters ten and eleven in Robert Thomas (2002), *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel).

the Scriptures and places it first in his list of theological perspectives. He describes the list as the convictions which form the basis of the Protestant system (Ramm, 1970:97). However, he then goes on to list and discuss other convictions which are commonly used to formulate principles of interpretation such as “the rule of progressive revelation” or “the rule that Scripture interprets Scripture.” It would seem that Ramm considers the clarity of the Scriptures both as an assumption as well as a principle. Whether this is Ramm’s intention or not, I believe that this is the wisest path among the options.

The Clarity of the Scriptures is a Presupposition that we Bring to the Bible

When the sincere believer approaches the Bible, he or she must approach it with confidence that he or she can know what it says. The Scriptures are revelation from God and therefore contain all that we need to know of God. It answers one’s most important questions of origin and purpose. The Bible provides humankind with the exact remedy needed for our sinful mortal condition. That remedy is forgiveness from God through faith in Jesus Christ. Never ending discussions about the meaning of meaning, the collision of “horizons” and hermeneutical self-awareness may be stimulating to the scholar or critic, but the child of God in the pew will quickly lose interest in such speculation, and may even begin to despair, wondering if the Bible has anything to say about their suicidal teenager or newly unemployed husband. The Bible is clear. God speaks to our need for salvation and redemption as well as for comfort, guidance, encouragement and correction. We must assume this to be true, otherwise there is not much purpose in reading and study. Our belief about God and his character dictates this as well as our belief about the Bible itself. Furthermore, the Bible affirms its own clarity explicitly and implicitly. The pastor, the Bible student and the church member can all confidently approach a biblical text believing that they can understand the general message, and that the message will be profitable for their own spiritual good as well as the good of others.

The Clarity of the Scriptures is also a Principle that is Useful for Interpretation

Sometimes referred to as the principle of literal meaning, or the “plain” meaning of the Scriptures, and sometimes listed on its own, the clarity of the Scriptures can be a useful rule of interpretation. Howard and William Hendricks list it as the primary principle in interpreting figurative language. They simply state, “Use the literal sense unless there is some good reason not to” (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1991:260). This is very similar to the principle provided above by Mal Couch. Unless the context, principles of language and grammar, or other principles of interpretation dictate that a figure of speech is being used or an

otherwise non-literal interpretation is required, then the meaning of a text is that which is the most literal or straightforward. The principle of the clarity of the Scriptures could be formulated in the following way: the meaning of a text is that which is clearest in light of the application of all other principles.¹¹

Conclusion

The perspicuity of the Scriptures is a doctrine that motivated the Reformers to translate the Bible into many languages so that its truths would be accessible to the church throughout the countries of Europe. This same truth should motivate Christians today to study the Scriptures for themselves and determine what the objective meaning of God's Word is.

This article has looked at the definition of the perspicuity of the Scriptures. The Word of God is sufficiently clear in all of its teaching that anyone who reads and studies it honestly, and with God's help, can understand what it means. That does not mean that every passage is equally clear. Furthermore, this truth does not negate the need for hard work in interpretation or for gifted teachers and preachers in the church.

The clarity of God's word is also a theological necessity. God himself gave us the Scriptures and he also invented communication and human languages. If his revelation is ambiguous or confusing, then God's goodness, justice and desire to save sinners would be called into question. A good and righteous God cannot punish sinners who fail to obey what they cannot understand. Likewise, the faith that God requires for salvation would be faith only in what is unknown or uncertain and therefore not real faith at all.

The nature of the Scriptures themselves also makes this doctrine a necessity. The Word of God to reveals God and also reveals his plan of redemption. Knowing God personally would be impossible if the revelation he provided is ambiguous. Knowing the path of redemption he has revealed would also be rendered hopeless.

Finally, the Scriptures themselves testify to their clarity by repeated

11 For some lists of "all the other principles," I refer you to Ramm in *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 93-162; Couch in *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*, pp. 52-70; and Roy Zuck in *Basic Bible Interpretation*, pp. 59-75. Another helpful resource listing twelve general principles of interpreting the Bible is Joel James (2008), *Expository Studying: A Practical Guide to Preparing Expository Sermons*, found on-line at <http://www.gracefellowship.co.za/files/Expository%20Studying%20PDF,%202009.pdf>. For a good example of applying numerous principles, including the principle of the clarity of the Scriptures, to a problem passage, see C. Ryan Jenkins (2002), "Faith and Works in Paul and James," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 159:63-79.

comparisons to light as well as other explicit statements. The blessings associated with reading and implementing the truth of God's word, as well as the original audience of the sacred writings also imply clarity.

In the end, the perspicuity of the Scriptures should be both a theological conviction as well as a principle of interpretation. This doctrine needs to be articulated and defended not only in theological discussion, but also in the church. Understanding this doctrine encourages the child of God to study for him/herself so that he/she may know the meaning of the text. Preachers and teachers also need to model the perspicuity of the Scriptures as well as sound hermeneutical principles in their public teaching so that believers might be equipped to apply those principles in their personal study.

The Savior commanded that we make disciples by baptizing and teaching all that He has commanded. This command, and every command in the Bible, presupposes the clarity of the Scriptures (Matthew 28:19-20). Every child of God and disciple of Jesus Christ can find great confidence in the hope that not only can they understand the full counsel of God, but they can teach it to others so that they might also become mature disciples.

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The Perspicuity of the Scriptures: Presupposition, Principle or Phantasm

Sažetak

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